Dark-eyed junco on firethorn

RICHARD DAY/DAYBREAK IMAGERY

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Birds & Blooms

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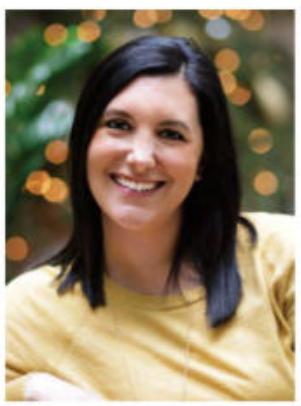

As long as my feeder is full and hungry birds like chickadees and cardinals let black oil sunflower seeds fall to the ground, dark-eyed juncos are a sure sight in my yard throughout the cold months. I always think of them as the cleanup crew because they busily forage for dropped seeds with their adorable pink bills.

Juncos are an interesting species, with different forms calling various parts of the U.S. home. In some cases, these forms have very distinct field marks, despite all being known as dark-eyed juncos. Bird pros Kenn and Kimberly Kaufman explain it in detail in "Junco Family Tree" on page 36.

Also in this issue, we feature the 12 finalists of the Backyard Photo Contest. Our staff narrowed the entries down to four favorites in each category—birds, butterflies and blooms—and now you get to choose the best of the best. Go to page 47 to find out how to vote for the ones you love. They are spectacular snapshots, and I hope the collection is a bright spot amid your winter days.

With the holidays approaching, you may be looking for ways to gift from afar. See 10 plants that make ideal presents in "Gifts to Grow On" on page 12, and cross nature lovers off your list with the picks in "Find the Perfect Gift" on page 34. Have a safe and healthy winter season!

Kirsten

KIRSTEN SCHRADER, EXECUTIVE EDITOR

GIVE

Gift a *Birds & Blooms* magazine subscription to family and friends this year for only $10 each. Buy now at *birdsandblooms.com/givetoday*.

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COUNT BIRDS

Find a count circle near you and join Audubon's annual Christmas Bird Count. The event kicks off Dec. 14 and runs through Jan. 5. Go to *audubon.org* to learn more.

Too Cute

Lori R. Bramble of Cambridge, Maryland, sprinkles holiday wreaths with birdseed for bird photo ops. "But as usual, the squirrels are quick to find the seeds," she says.

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GIFT TAG: PICSFIVE/SHUTTERSTOCK; JUNCO: JENNIFER STANDING

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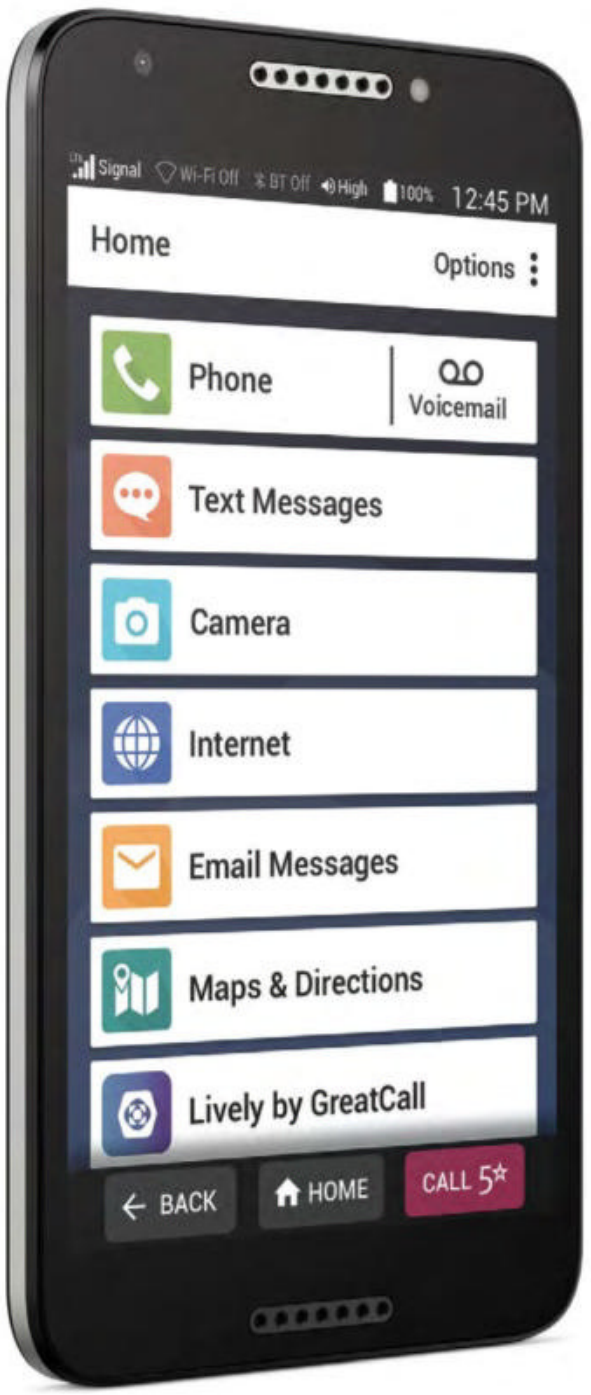

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Winter Sweets

Delight birds with the berries of this low-maintenance shrub.

BIRD BENEFIT

Watch for berry lovers such as robins, bluebirds and cedar waxwings. They gobble up the bright fruit and appreciate the cover the shrub provides.

Wildfire Winterberry

Ilex verticillata 'Bailfire', Zones 4 to 9

This large female winterberry starts to shine with loads of red berries as temperatures drop. Winterberries are native to the eastern U.S., require little maintenance, and tolerate clay and wet soil.

Attracts:

Light needs: Full sun.

Size: 8 to 10 feet tall and wide.

Grown for: A showpiece hedge that doesn't mind moisture.

Foliage: Dark green, turning yellow in autumn.

How to get berries: Wildfire needs a male plant to produce its signature fruit. Grow Jim Dandy, a prolific pollenizer, nearby to see Wildfire's benefits.

BAILEY NURSERIES

Male varied thrush

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: BARBARA CLARK; NEVIN HAYTER; DUNCRAFT.COM

Voice of the Northwest

A haunting call and fancy feathers make this thrush stand out. **BY SALLY ROTH**

When looking for words to best describe the varied thrush, the phrase *dramatically beautiful* certainly comes to mind. About the size and shape of the American robin, this fancy thrush sports a bold black band that resembles a necklace on its rich orange breast that contrasts with a blue-gray back, orange wing bars and a wide black stripe across its eye. Females are similar but paler.

Seeing this species is a treat, since varied thrushes are "not the kind of bird to sit out in the open," says Maeve Sowles, president of the Lane County Audubon Society in Oregon. "You hear them more than you see them."

These particular thrushes live year-round in the wet forests of the mild Pacific Coast—all the way from southeastern Alaska to Northern California. Females lay one to six sky blue eggs, sometimes speckled, in a woven cup that's often decorated with moss.

Farther inland and north they are migratory, nesting in forests from Alaska to the mountains of Montana. They retreat southward and to lower elevations in autumn, when they often visit backyards and city parks.

Just like the first robin of spring, "the first report of a varied thrush in fall gets a lot of excitement!" Maeve says. She recommends opening a window on an autumn morning and listening for a very haunting yet distinct call.

The varied thrush sings a single drawn-out note, then pauses, then another note comes, and so on. "Each note grows out of nothing, swells to a full tone, and then fades away to nothing until one is carried away with the mysterious song," ornithologist and bird artist Louis Agassiz Fuertes said in a handbook more than a hundred years ago.

Look for these ground feeders under trees and shrubs, often scratching aggressively in leaf litter for beetles, sowbugs, snails, worms and other morsels. "In fall and winter, they eat fruit and berries from trees and bushes," Maeve says. "This includes crabapples, native salal, thimbleberry, cascara, snowberry and others—well, for as long as they last."

To attract varied thrushes to your yard, scatter birdseed mix on the ground and offer suet in a wire cage. "Varied thrushes stay all winter," Maeve says, "even in snow and ice storms. We don't have cardinals, but a varied thrush in snow is just as impressive!"

This species is known for being a notorious wanderer outside of breeding season. It's been sighted in every state of the Lower 48, often foraging in the midst of a flock of robins. Look closely and you, too, may spot this beauty.

THE FEED

"I was overly happy when I spotted a varied thrush in my yard, and he waited for me to get my camera. Such beautiful and subtle coloration."

Nevin Hayter
CROFTON, BRITISH COLUMBIA

SPOT THE DIFFERENCE

It may be difficult to tell female or juvenile varied thrush apart from robins since they share similar coloring and size. You'll know it's a varied thrush if there are stripes on the chest and wings.

FEEDING TIME

Beckon varied thrushes to your yard with an open-air ground platform feeder. $50 at *duncraft.com*

TOP 10

Gifts to Grow On

Skip the wrapping paper; your loved ones will cherish these plants.

BY JILL STAAKE

1

WHEN TO DIG
In warm and dry climates, gardeners can plant paperwhites outside in late fall for winter blooms.

1 Paperwhites

NARCISSUS PAPYRACEUS, ZONES 8 TO 10

The pale, delicate blooms are lovely, but it's the fragrance that makes paperwhites such a winner. In the darkest days of winter, these couldn't-be-easier bulbs evoke the scent of spring. After forcing, you have to wait only four to six weeks before you start to see the blooms.

Why we love it:
It doesn't even need soil to grow. Place bulbs in a shallow dish of stones, with the tops exposed and water just reaching the bottom of the bulb.

2 Amaryllis

HIPPEASTRUM SPP., ZONES 8 TO 10

Big, brilliant amaryllis blooms stand tall on strong stems in a variety of hues, such as white, red, pink and orange. With proper care, the bulbs will flower year after year. For extra flair, seek out types like butterfly amaryllis *(H. papilio),* which has maroon and white stripes.

Why we love it:
Waxed amaryllis bulb kits are readily available during the holiday season and require little effort to produce a striking display in your home.

3 Peace lily

SPATHIPHYLLUM SPP., ZONES 11 TO 12

The broad shining leaves of the peace lily are set off by white bracts that form a hood over tiny off-white flowers. Give this houseplant bright indirect light for a few hours a day to encourage flowering.

Why we love it: A peace lily is as low maintenance as it gets. The only thing to be careful of is watering. Keep the soil moist and always pour off excess saucer water.

ON THE SAFE SIDE *When picking a plant to gift, consider whether the person has pets. Many houseplants are toxic to dogs and cats. Check the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals' website for a comprehensive list of toxic plants.*

4 Gardenia

GARDENIA JASMINOIDES, ZONES 8 TO 11

Gardenias need a bit more care than some houseplants, but you will be rewarded with striking white flowers against dark foliage. Give them bright sun at least six hours a day and grow in moist, acidic soil.

Why we love it: The waxy, sweetly perfumed blooms make the extra fuss worthwhile. White Gem is a dwarf variety that's perfect for growing in pots.

1: VALTER JACINTO/GETTY IMAGES; 2: JOHN DOYLE; 3: GAVRAN333/GETTY IMAGES; 4: LFO62/GETTY IMAGES

5 Begonia

BEGONIA SPP., ZONES 8 TO 11

These old-fashioned favorites welcome indirect bright light and infrequent watering. They also appreciate some humidity, so set the pot over a pebble-filled saucer of water.

Why we love it:
With hundreds of species and cultivars, there truly is a begonia for everyone. For interesting foliage, try Angel Wing begonias. If you prefer blossoms, tuberous begonias are the way to go. Any type can be transplanted outside.

6 Kalanchoe

KALANCHOE BLOSSFELDIANA, ZONES 10 TO 12

This succulent with thick leaves thrives in winter in an indoor, low-humidity environment. During this usually dull time, the plant produces masses of tiny florets.

Why we love it:
The brilliant red, pink, orange or white blooms show up when they're needed the most and last for months on end. When they are gone, the attractive, shiny foliage makes a nice display on its own.

7 African violet

STREPTOCARPUS IONANTHUS, ZONES 11 TO 12

Although a common gift plant, African violets can be a little fussy. They're finicky about water, preferring to be consistently moist. Be careful when watering. If you splash cold water on a leaf, it may develop a spot. Once you find the right windowsill and watering schedule, this gem rewards you with a burst of color.

Why we love it: The flowers come in many shades, including white, pink, maroon and just about every hue of purple.

AN ENCOURAGING NOTE *A simple card with care instructions is a thoughtful way to ensure your gift lasts. Write down how much sun and water the plant needs along with any other special information, such as how to encourage the plant to bloom.*

8 Orchid

PHALAENOPSIS SPP., ZONES 10 TO 12

Don't be intimidated by these tropical treasures. *Phalaenopsis*, also called moth orchid, is both easy to care for and requires little more than a weekly watering, filtered light and protection from drafts.

Why we love it: Nothing adds a note of elegant beauty to a home quite like an orchid. The blooms last for weeks and some orchids boast a lovely scent.

5: GABRIEL ZIMMER; 6: COCONE/SHUTTERSTOCK; 7: DIFYDAVE/GETTY IMAGES; 8: LESLIE BANKS/GETTY IMAGES; 9: MARCIA STRAUB/GETTY IMAGES; 10: ANDREW_MAYOVSKYY/GETTY IMAGES

9 Poinsettia

EUPHORBIA PULCHERRIMA, ZONES 9 TO 11

A beloved Christmas classic, poinsettias show off their holiday colors when nights are long and days are short. Keep the soil moist but not wet, and protect plants from chilly drafts.

Why we love it: Look for new, delicate white and pink varieties of this familiar red plant. Jingle Bell Rock has brilliant red leaves with white spots.

THE RIGHT LIGHT

Where to put your plants that need indirect light.

Many houseplants can't handle direct sunlight, essentially getting a sunburn with too much exposure. When a plant needs indirect light, a north-facing window usually provides a bright yet gentle light source. A sheer curtain over a window may also work.

10 Lemon tree

CITRUS LIMON, ZONES 9 TO 11

Tuck a lemon tree into a sunny corner during the cold months, then move the pot to the patio for summer. Dwarf varieties grow only 4 to 6 feet tall and behave more like a bush than a tree.

Why we love it: The sweet scent of citrus blossoms can turn a home into a Southern paradise. A dwarf Meyer lemon makes the perfect glass of lemonade, and the plant is suited for pots.

Jill Staake lives in Florida, where her growing amaryllis collection delights her with vivid displays each spring.

Watering Made Easy

Keep houseplants satisfied with systems that do the work for you.

BY HELEN NEWLING LAWSON

LEFT: YANA FEFELOVA/SHUTTERSTOCK; HOSE: PHOTO COURTESY OF GARDENER'S SUPPLY COMPANY

Watering plants inside a dry home, especially in winter, can turn into a daily chore. Houseplant watering systems are here to save the day and to keep you and your plants happier by providing consistent moisture, without overwatering. To pick the right solution, all you need to know is how much water your plants need.

Try these handy gadgets—they'll keep watering to a minimum while keeping your plants looking their best.

Spikes and Globes

These simple devices let water slowly drip into the soil. Watering spikes require a glass or plastic bottle to act as a reservoir. Watering globes are an all-in-one solution, and many have a pretty blown-glass look. Depending on the size of your container, you may need several spikes or globes to keep your plant evenly watered. These are best for plants that like to stay continually moist.

Self-Watering Containers

These handy pots feature a built-in reservoir in the base of the planter that allows water to be pulled into the soil as it dries. One downside is that they typically need refilling every few days. Most models recommended for houseplants are made of solid-colored plastic, but those designed for outdoor use may give you more options.

Humidity Mats

Water-soaked mats placed in trays below the plants or on top of the soil keep moisture levels steady. Tray mats work best with terra-cotta pots but may dry out quickly in direct sunlight. Rings that rest on the soil are visible and might be unsightly, so add some mulch to disguise them.

Soil Additives

Pellets added to the potting mix absorb and then slowly release water back into the soil to reduce the need to water. Some are made from water-storing polymers, or you can try ones made of biodegradable wool. Do not use these in combination with systems that wick water into the soil; the water-retaining ability of these additives will pull more moisture than your plants probably need.

Drip Irrigation Systems

As a more complex setup, a drip irrigation system supplies a slow flow of water via an emitter attached to tubes. Plants must be close enough to the device for the tubes to reach. Built-in timers can be adjusted for plants that enjoy a dry spell.

STUFF WE LOVE

Top picks to make watering a breeze.

◀ INDOOR HOSE
This mini coil hose (also shown above) with sprayer attaches to a kitchen sink faucet. *gardeners.com*

HYDROSPIKE® ▶
Similar to watering spikes, these have a flexible tube that pulls from a larger container for less frequent refills. *hydrospike.com*

◀ WOOL PELLETS
These reduce watering needs by 25% and also deliver a gentle feeding from natural nutrients in the wool. *wildvalleyfarms.com*

Which Finch?

Look for these classic pine siskin markings.

Pointed bills are thinner than those of other common finches.

Long wings extend toward the tips of the tails.

Yellow markings on wings and tail distinguish them from house finches.

Streaky brown all over, but especially on the chest.

Notched tails that are easy to see in flight.

CATHY KEIFER/GETTY IMAGES

CONTEXT CLUES

Although pine siskins call parts of the West home year-round, these birds are winter visitors in most of the U.S., flying in after the breeding season. Look for these social birds flitting about thistle feeders in busy flocks, often with goldfinches.

Sacred Stone of the Southwest is on the Brink of Extinction

Centuries ago, Persians, Tibetans and Mayans considered turquoise a gemstone of the heavens, believing the striking blue stones were sacred pieces of sky. Today, the rarest and most valuable turquoise is found in the American Southwest—but the future of the blue beauty is unclear.

On a recent trip to Tucson, we spoke with fourth generation turquoise traders who explained that less than five percent of turquoise mined worldwide can be set into jewelry and only about twenty mines in the Southwest supply gem-quality turquoise. Once a thriving industry, many Southwest mines have run dry and are now closed.

We found a limited supply of turquoise from Arizona and snatched it up for our ***Sedona Turquoise Collection***. Inspired by the work of those ancient craftsmen and designed to showcase the exceptional blue stone, each stabilized vibrant cabochon features a unique, one-of-a-kind matrix surrounded in Bali metalwork. You could drop over $1,200 on a turquoise pendant, or you could secure 26 carats of genuine Arizona turquoise for **just $99**.

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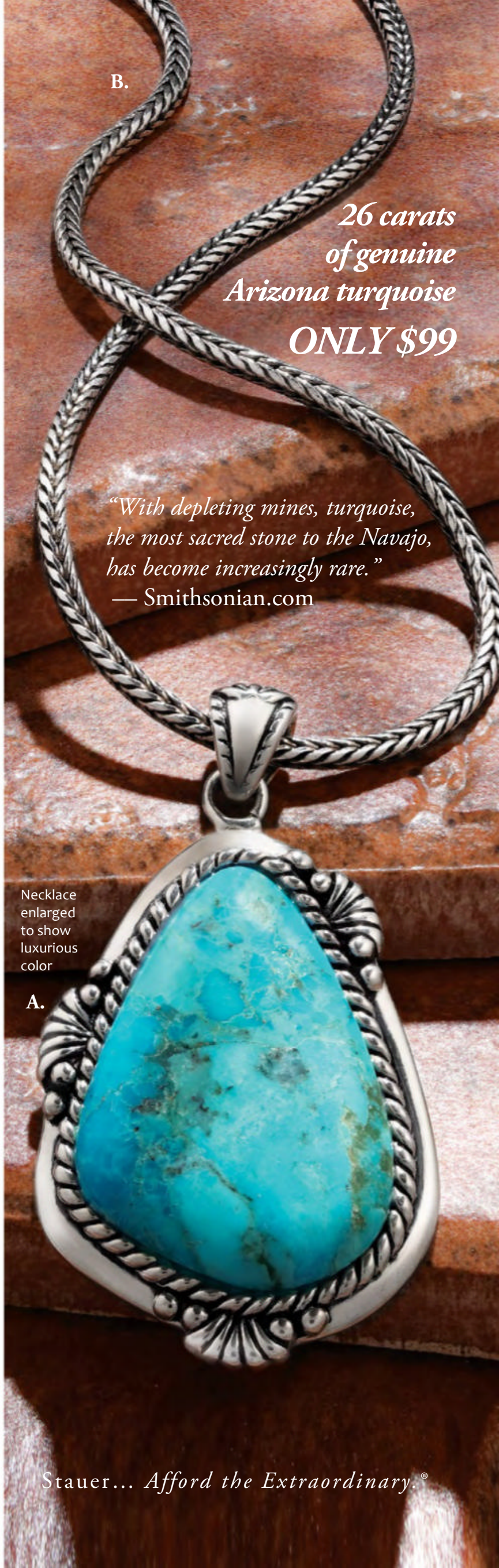

CBD FOR YOUR PAIN

Everyone feels the hurt as you age, but CBD can help you deal with it BY BETH GILES

Life really does fly by. Before I knew it, my 70s had arrived, and with them came some new gifts from dear ol' Mother Nature—frequent knee pain, stress, low energy and sleeplessness. Now, I'm a realist about these things, I knew I wasn't going to be young and springy forever. But still, with "golden years" nearly on my doorstep, I couldn't help but feel a little cheated. That is until I found my own secret weapon. Another gift from Mother Nature.

It began a few months back when I was complaining about my aches and pains to my marathon-running granddaughter, Jen. She casually mentioned how she uses CBD oil to help with her joint pain. She said that CBD gave her more focus and clarity throughout the day and that her lingering muscle and joint discomfort no longer bothered her. She even felt comfortable signing up for back-to-back marathons two weekends in a row this year. That made even this self-proclaimed skeptic take notice.

But I still had some concerns. According to one study in the Journal of the American Medical Association, 70% of CBD products didn't contain the amount of CBD stated on their labels. And, as a consumer, that's terrifying!

If I was going to try CBD, I needed to trust the source through and through. My two-fold research process naturally led me to Zebra CBD.

First, I started calling my family and friends. Call me old fashioned but I wanted to know if there were people whom I trusted (more than anonymous testimonials) who've had success using CBD besides my niece.

Secondly, I wanted cold hard facts. Diving deep into the world of CBD research and clinical studies, I came across Emily Gray M.D., a physician at the University of California at San Diego (UCSD) Medical School and medical advisor to Zebra CBD who is researching the effects of CBD. Dr. Gray wrote "early results with CBD have been promising and we have a lot of research underway now. I've had several patients using CBD with good success. It's important that you know your source of CBD and how to use it properly."

After hearing it from the doctor's mouth, I returned to my research, asking more people and was amazed by the number of close friends and family who were already on the CBD train. Apparently, I was the only one without a clue! And funny enough, a couple of friends who commented were using the same brand as my granddaughter—Zebra CBD. There was no consensus as to why they were using CBD, but the top reasons given were for muscle & joint discomfort, mood support, sleep support, stress and headaches, as well as supporting overall health & wellness.

Eventually, even the most skeptical of the bunch can be won over. With a trusted CBD source in mind, I decided to give it a go.

When I viewed Zebra CBD's selection online, I was impressed by its array of products, including CBD oils called tinctures, topicals, chewable tablets, mints and gummies. After reading on their website that all their products are made with organically-grown hemp, I ordered... and it arrived within 2 days!

The first product I tried was the Rub. Now this stuff was strong. Immediately after rubbing it on my knee, the soothing effects kicked in. It had that familiar menthol cooling effect, which I personally find very relieving. And the best part is, after two weeks of using it, my knee pain no longer affected my daily mobility.

The Zebra Mint Oil, on the other hand, had a different but equally positive effect on my body. To take it, the instructions suggest holding the oil in your mouth for about 30 seconds. This was simple enough, and the mint taste was, well, minty. After about 15 minutes, a sense of calm came over my body. It's hard to describe exactly; It's more like an overall sense of relaxation—as if I just walked out of a spa, and now I'm ready to seize the day. Needless to say, I've really enjoyed the oil.

While it hasn't been a catch-all fix to every one of my health issues, it has eased the level and frequency of my aches. And it sure doesn't seem like a coincidence how much calmer and more focused I am.

All-in-all, CBD is one of those things that you have to try for yourself. Although I was skeptical at first, I can safely say that I'm now a Zebra CBD fan and that I highly recommend their products.

Also, I managed to speak with a company spokesperson willing to provide an exclusive offer to our readers. If you order this month, you'll receive $10 off your first order by using promo code "**BB10**" at checkout. Plus, the company offers a 100% No-Hassle, Money-Back Guarantee. You can try it yourself and order Zebra CBD at ZebraCBD.com or at 1-888-762-2699.

BIRD TALES
Special

BIRD TALES

I never leave home without my camera. I pulled over one day to capture some birds in a tree. Then I saw this darling pair of California quail snuggling on a fence post in the snow. I was so excited!

Kim Steed
MINDEN, NEVADA

Winter Ready

The weather may be frightful, but these snowy scenes captured by readers will warm your heart.

At this time of year, we think of decorating and hanging ornaments on our Christmas tree. I also love to look outside and see nature's winter ornaments, such as red berries encased in ice, which are stunning against a winter background. But nothing brightens a scene like a brilliant male cardinal in the snow.

Anne Duvall
GREENCASTLE, PENNSYLVANIA

This tiny common redpoll was waiting for his turn at a feeder in my backyard on a cold morning when I noticed him. I know it must be a hard time of year for all birds, so I always keep my feeders filled.

Jim Van Schyndel PULASKI, WISCONSIN

We thought winter was finally done for the year, but another blast of snow came. I ventured out with my trusty Nikon camera to one of my favorite spots. This red-shafted northern flicker's movements were quick as he made his rounds between the mountain ash berries and crabapples.

Meghann Fletcher
PENTICTON, BRITISH COLUMBIA

Winter Feast

Help mockingbirds during the winter by growing berry shrubs they love—dogwood and winterberry are two favorites.

One day last winter this northern mockingbird visited our winterberry shrub while it was snowing. It is an uncommon sight for us. I was thrilled to capture this beautiful moment and bird.

George Kurzik
HELLAM, PENNSYLVANIA

Bohemian waxwings

are my favorite winter birds. Oftentimes, a few of my photographer friends and I bundle up and go out together in search of them. I look forward to their cheerful arrival again this year.

Amy Bragg
ANCHORAGE, ALASKA

Just guessing, but I don't think this female northern cardinal was a very happy camper! I found her one day, sitting on my front porch railing in the midst of snow. I love backyard birds and enjoy learning so much about their behavior by watching and studying them.

Jean Owens
PARIS, TENNESSEE

Seeking Shelter

Cardinals often take cover in evergreens during winter. Add a few trees to your yard to offer them a safe haven from the elements.

I hung this Christmas decoration on my bird feeder pole. Soon I happened to see this little Carolina wren picking at the greenery and pine cones. I opened the window very slowly, trying to not scare the bird, and I snapped away. I don't often see these wrens, but one was here in the winter last year, too. I'm hoping to see it again soon.

Carol Shaffer
WINDBER, PENNSYLVANIA

This was a new visitor to my backyard: a white-breasted nuthatch! The bird took an interest in the feeder I'd recently hung, and I had fun trying to capture a photo.

Ashley Maris
GRANTS PASS, OREGON

Save for Later

Nuthatches rely on a caching system to make it through the cold months, so keeping feeders full of seeds and nuts helps them thrive.

I have the honor of being a volunteer at Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge in Cambridge, Maryland. This comes with the opportunity to get photos of our migrating birds when they stop to refuel for their travels. These are just a couple of snow geese out of the thousands that visit us every winter, from December to March.

Beverly Middleton EAST NEW MARKET, MARYLAND

Here's a very special snowy owl

that visited our area and stayed for a month or so. The owl was originally perched on the roof of a building, looking for lunch. As she flew away, we walked back to the car and found she was right around the corner of the building, behind a fence. We all stopped in our tracks, took a few shots and off she went again. It was an amazing experience.

Elaine Hessler
AVON, OHIO

In Cincinnati, Ohio, we have a street called Wentworth that is lined with rows of hawthorn trees. Every winter tons of robins gather to eat the berries. After a bad snow and ice storm a couple of years ago, I came across this sight of robins sitting on the icy branches.

Laura Retyi
CINCINNATI, OHIO

Sometimes the weather makes it difficult to go to your favorite places to capture all the beauty of winter. But it's always fun to decorate your own backyard so feathered visitors can come to you. This red-breasted nuthatch was a regular visitor to our feeders. I put a few treats in the pot and it became a sweet place for the bird to come sit and enjoy the warmth of the December sun.

Sharon Sauriol
WASHINGTON, MICHIGAN

Peanuts to Go

If it seems as though your birds are going through peanuts quickly, keep in mind that many, like jays, often store them for later.

This gorgeous Steller's jay lives near my mountain cabin. Whenever I show up, I always bring a bag of peanuts. All I have to do is whistle and the birds come to eat! I'm always excited and entertained as I watch them fly in and out.

Bobbie Rash
HELENA, MONTANA

During winter, the gray color of white-winged doves tends to blend in with the gray skies and tree branches. But on this particular day, the sky was a clear, beautiful blue as this dove sat in a tree. I've always loved the many doves that visit my yard, especially since they symbolize peace.

Julie Risk
GRAPEVINE, TEXAS

It was snowing moments before I noticed this tufted titmouse while looking out my dining room window. The sun was hazy but cast a gentle light, which really brought out the colors of the bird.

Debbie Parker MEDINA, OHIO

Messy Eaters

Give owls a boost by resisting the urge to clean up spilled birdseed. Owls eat many critters that are drawn to scattered seeds.

I frequent the trails at

Proud Lake State Park in Michigan, and one winter day I saw a large bird fly into a tree. I initially thought it was a hawk, only to be stunned when I got closer and saw it was a barred owl. It was my first experience with one of these owls, though since then I've encountered many at the park.

Shawn Spencer
COMMERCE TOWNSHIP, MICHIGAN

I was at the Lowry Nature Center in Victoria, Minnesota, on a cold day last winter. I was watching for birds at the top of a hill in the gently falling snow. There were a lot of dried plants in the area, and this goldfinch came and landed on a stem near me. I loved the way the snow and distant grasses created such a soft scene. The goldfinch was holding on to the stem in such a delicate way.

Roslynn Long
BURNSVILLE, MINNESOTA

Seed Buffet

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junco family tree

Meet the many variations of this beloved snowbird and popular wintertime visitor.

BY KENN AND KIMBERLY KAUFMAN

CHRISTINE HAINES

Female Oregon junco

Slate-colored junco

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: MARIE READ; DESIGN PIX/DAVID PONTON/GETTY IMAGES; KATHY ADAMS CLARK/KAC PRODUCTIONS

WEARING SUBTLE HUES OF GRAY, BROWN AND WHITE, with round little bodies and sweet expressions, juncos are among our most-beloved birds. Since they appear to carry gray storm clouds on their backs and white snow on their bellies, juncos are often referred to as snowbirds. But they also earn this nickname because of the cadence of their southerly migration. They fly into many areas just in time to usher in winter snows. The arrival of little flocks of juncos gives us something to look forward to, even if winter follows closely behind.

Juncos show a remarkable amount of variation from place to place. Their regional color forms were previously classified as separate species. Now most have been combined under the name of dark-eyed junco, but it's still easy to recognize the differences in plumage. Depending on where you live, you might expect to see more than one variety of these fascinating birds.

The Most Widespread Junco

Of all the forms of juncos, the one with the widest range is the slate-colored type. Slate-colored juncos are found in summer across most of Alaska and Canada, south into the northeastern states and the Appalachians, and as far south as Georgia. In winter they are common from southern Canada to the Gulf states, mostly east of the Rockies but with a few scattered throughout the West.

These are the least colorful of the juncos, with their basic gray and white, but they are still beautiful in their simplicity. They share some similarities with other juncos, such as their white outer tail feathers that are obvious when they fly. In addition, they almost always build their nests on the ground, usually in a spot well hidden under shrubs or overhanging branches. And, like other juncos, they form small flocks in winter, often joining with other birds, such as white-throated sparrows or American tree sparrows. They fit in well with these birds because juncos are actually members of the sparrow family, despite their different color pattern.

Slate-colored junco

For their winter habitat, juncos favor partially open areas, including the edges of woods and suburban backyards. They are readily attracted to feeders with white proso millet, sunflower chips and other types of high-quality seeds. They are most likely to use open-tray feeders close to the ground and often just forage on the ground underneath the feeders.

Along the Oregon Trail

While the slate-colored type is the standard junco throughout the East and the far North, the most widespread form in the West is the Oregon junco. Birds in this category have a nesting range that stretches from southeastern Alaska through western Canada, to Idaho and Wyoming, and south throughout the West Coast states. In Washington, Oregon and California, Oregon juncos can be found in summer not only in the high mountains but also along the coast. They readily adapt to nesting in parks and gardens, so they're actually year-round backyard birds in many places where the "snowbird" nickname really doesn't apply.

Oregon juncos don't all look the same. In some areas the males have black heads, while in other areas the heads are dark gray or blue-gray. The colors of the back and sides vary from dark brown to bright cinnamon to pale pinkish brown. All are more colorful than the slate-colored juncos of the East.

Variations on a Theme

Although the Oregon juncos are found throughout much of the West, four other varieties live there as well. All of these forms have separate breeding ranges in summer. But in winter, when they migrate farther south or to lower elevations in the mountains, all may overlap.

The Black Hills area of South Dakota makes up most of the summer range of the white-winged junco. Despite its name, the bird has wings that are mostly gray with only two narrow white wing bars. Aside from those marks, it looks like a slightly larger, paler gray version of the slate-colored junco.

Just out to the west, in Wyoming and southern Montana, is the summer range of juncos that are also large and pale, but with brown backs and pinkish buff sides. These are sometimes called pink-sided juncos but

White-winged junco

Gray-headed junco

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: BOB WALKER; JAMES MUNDY, NATURE'S ARK PHOTOGRAPHY/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO; FRANCIS & JANICE BERGQUIST; AGAMI PHOTO AGENCY/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO; STEVE AND DAVE MASLOWSKI

Red-backed junco

are occasionally considered a type of Oregon junco. Both white-winged and pink-sided juncos spread south in winter, mainly along the east side of the Rockies.

The mountains of Colorado, Utah and Nevada are the main summer range of the gray-headed junco. This bird is mostly gray, including its head, back and wings, but the center of its back is a bright reddish brown. Like the other juncos, its bill is pale pink. But just to the south, in the mountains of central Arizona and New Mexico, lives a bird that looks almost the same but with a bill at least half black. Called the red-backed junco, it's less migratory than most of its cousins, generally staying in the same mountain forests during all seasons.

At some places in the West, three or four types of dark-eyed juncos may mix together in the same winter flocks. In the East, almost all the juncos are of the slate-colored type, but the occasional Oregon junco wanders as far east as the Atlantic Coast. Wherever they go, whether they herald the coming of snow or just a mild change of seasons, these gentle, attractive birds are always welcome visitors. ●

Kenn and Kimberly Kaufman enjoy seeing flocks of dark-eyed juncos visit their northern Ohio yard for about half the year, from October to April.

Pink-sided junco

WHY DARK-EYED, ANYWAY?

Yellow-eyed junco

IN 1973, WHEN SPECIES WITH NAMES LIKE slate-colored, Oregon and white-winged juncos were all combined into one species, scientists looked for a neutral name. They chose one to distinguish this bird from the yellow-eyed junco, a bird with bright yellow-orange eyes that lives mainly in the mountains of Mexico and southern Arizona.

Houseplant Rescue

Help is here! The *Birds & Blooms* garden pro offers solutions to the most common indoor plant problems. **BY MELINDA MYERS**

THE FIRST STEP in treating your plants is to understand the likely dilemmas and their solutions. Here are a few common questions I receive about ailing houseplants and how to address them. Once you know what to look for, you'll be surprised by how quickly your diagnostic skills improve.

Why Are the Leaves Yellow?

Start by evaluating your regular watering habits. Watering too frequently or infrequently can cause leaves to yellow. Tropical plants prefer moist soil, while cacti and succulents like the soil to go dry between watering. Always use your finger to check the top 1 or 2 inches of soil for moisture before watering.

Increase success by using containers with drainage holes or self-watering pots with weep holes that allow excess water

Golden pothos

What Do Brown Edges Mean?

If your plant is sporting crispy, dark edges, it may mean you need to water more often. Check the soil moisture, and slowly reduce the number of days in between watering. Watch your plants for signs of improvement.

Lack of humidity could also be the cause. Tropical plants prefer higher humidity than we have in our homes. When we turn on the heat in winter, there's even less moisture in the air. Group plants together so that as one loses moisture through its leaves, the neighbors benefit. Or place plants on saucers or trays filled with pebbles and water. Set a pot on the pebbles above the water. As water evaporates, it increases the humidity around the plant, where it is needed.

Snake plant

to escape. Pour off any water that collects in the saucer to avoid root rot, or place pebbles in the saucer to elevate the pot above the excess water.

Once you rule out improper watering, it's time to review your fertilization schedule. Let the plants be your guide. Pale, yellow or stunted leaves may mean the plants need a nutrient boost. Use a diluted solution of houseplant fertilizer and only fertilize actively growing plants from spring through early fall, even if they're always indoors.

Mites, aphids and scale pests suck plant juices, causing the leaves to yellow and turn brown. A strong blast of water dislodges many of the insects. A couple of applications of insecticidal soap will also manage these pests and immature scale insects. Organic horticulture oil labeled for use on houseplants is effective at controlling pests at all stages.

Why Is My Plant Spindly and Leaning?

Light is likely the cause of these problems. Give plants a quarter turn every few weeks to promote even growth. Let in more light if plants have thin stems and excessive space between each set of leaves.

Plants that need a lot of light thrive when placed in front of an east- or west-facing window. Low-light plants can be 6 feet back, off to the side of these windows or near a north-facing one. Once you provide the right

Chinese evergreen

PREVIOUS SPREAD: SWITLANA SONYASHNA/SHUTTERSTOCK; THIS SPREAD, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: GRAPHICDNA/GETTY IMAGES; VISIONS BV, NETHERLANDS/VISIONSPICTURES & PHOTOGRAPHY;

Cast iron plant

Philodendron

amount of light, pinch off the growing tips of leggy plants to encourage compact growth.

What Are These Spots?

Brown, black and water-soaked spots on leaves and stems often indicate a fungal or bacterial disease is the problem.

Adjust the watering schedule and do not allow plants to sit in excess water. Often that alone is enough to stop the disease's progress. Remove and dispose of any soft, discolored stems and leaves. Trim off any rotten roots and repot in fresh potting mix in a container slightly larger than the remaining roots.

Why Are the New Leaves Small?

When new leaves are smaller than normal, the plant could be pot-bound or may need to be fertilized or moved to a brighter location. Look for other clues when making your diagnosis.

If the water runs out of the pot quickly and roots are filling the container, it's time to move your plant to the next size container. Avoid moving pot-bound plants to much larger containers, which can slow above-ground growth and lead to root rot. If the pot size seems adequate, evaluate your fertilizer schedule and light.

What's the Sticky Stuff?

Pests such as mites, aphids, scale and mealy bugs drink up plant juices, secreting the excess. This clear sticky substance is called honeydew and is often the first clue these pests are feeding on your plants. As I described earlier, try rinsing off the bugs first. If that doesn't get rid of them, move on to insecticidal soap or organic horticulture oil labeled for houseplants.

How Do I Get Rid of the Small Flies?

Fungus gnats are not harmful but certainly are annoying. The immature gnats feed on organic matter in the soil while the adult flies flit around your home.

To evict them, allow the soil to go a bit drier and trap the adults with a container of apple cider vinegar on the countertop. You could also use organic *Bacillus thuringiensis israelensis,* which is in Mosquito Bits. Sprinkle the product over the soil surface and repeat as often as the label directions recommend. •

Houseplants were Melinda Myers' gateway into gardening and a career in horticulture. She is excited to see so many others growing indoor plants and is happy to lend a helping hand.

TOUGH AS NAILS

Match these plants with the right amount of sun and water to expect success.

- Snake plant (*Sanseveria* spp.)
- Philodendron
- Pothos
- Chinese evergreen
- Cast iron plant
- ZZ plant

ZZ plant

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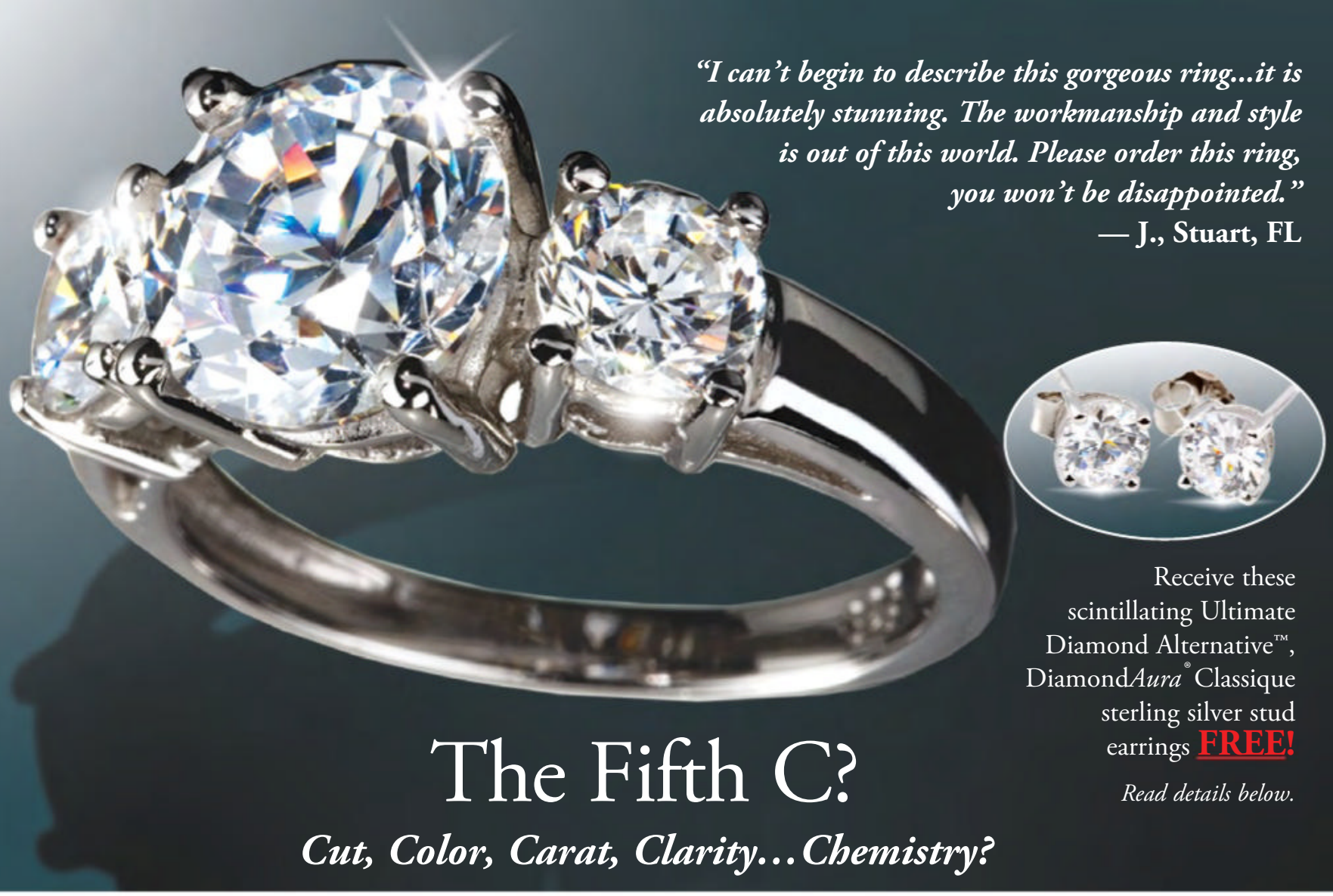

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Last year's contest winner shares the story behind the stunning shot.

I took this photo of an acrobatic Nashville warbler hanging on my backyard cherry tree in spring. It's special to me because I live in the suburbs and don't often see migrating warblers in my yard. This Nashville was catching insects buzzing around the blooms.

Andy Raupp
ELGIN, ILLINOIS

BIRDS

1 **GREAT BLUE HERONS**
Curt Lundeen
MEQUON, WISCONSIN

2 **MOUNTAIN BLUEBIRD**
Laurie Normandeau
LONGMONT, COLORADO

3 **BROAD-TAILED HUMMINGBIRD**
Mike Rael
HIGHLANDS RANCH, COLORADO

4 **NORTHERN FLICKER**
Jeffrey Kauffman
LANCASTER, PENNSYLVANIA

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3
4

BUTTERFLIES

1 **MONARCH CATERPILLARS**
Kelly Rabenstine
BIGLERVILLE, PENNSYLVANIA

2 **EASTERN TIGER SWALLOWTAIL**
Ron Horne
DOWNERS GROVE, ILLINOIS

3 **EASTERN TAILED-BLUE**
Michele Lam
LEXINGTON, VIRGINIA

4 **MONARCHS**
Mary Carlson
PRINCETON, MINNESOTA

3

4

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BLOOMS

1 **SUNFLOWERS**
Terry Crank
SEDGEWICKVILLE, MISSOURI

2 **ARGENTINE GIANT**
Spencer Fairbanks
FOUNTAIN HILLS, ARIZONA

3 **HYDRANGEA**
Lance Bruce
ZEBULON, NORTH CAROLINA

4 **POPPIES**
Tom Morack
COOKEVILLE, TENNESSEE

KEEP YOUR CAMERAS UP!

Next year's Backyard Photo Contest will be announced in our August/September 2021 issue. In the meantime, follow us on Instagram (*@birdsblooms*) and use *#birdsandblooms* to share your best nature photos with us.

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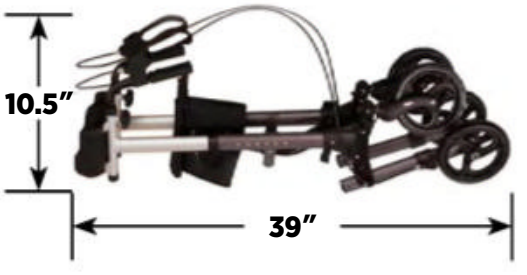

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Ask the Experts

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Male American goldfinch

FOTOREQUEST/SHUTTERSTOCK

Q Do male American goldfinches lose their black caps in winter?

Kitty Carty PRINEVILLE, OREGON

Kenn and Kimberly: Goldfinches, like most small birds, molt all their feathers at the end of summer or during fall. By the time winter arrives, the snappy yellow and black plumage of the males is replaced by a new, but much more drab, set of feathers, lacking the black cap and most of the gold tones. This molt during the fall is far less noticeable than the transition back to their bright breeding plumage in spring. It's fascinating to watch how quickly the males transition back into their dapper summer plumage.

Q What kind of bird is this? I saw it in a swampy area.

Gail Jakubiak HUDSON, FLORIDA

Kenn and Kimberly: Mainly a winter visitor in Florida, this yellow-rumped warbler arrives in late fall and leaves in early spring. In this pose, most of its key field marks are hidden, including a yellow patch at each side of the chest and its trademark yellow rump patch. But it's recognizable by the contrast of its brown cheek patch, white throat and striped chest. While many warblers leave the U.S. to fly deep into the tropics in winter, yellow-rumped warblers can thrive in cold weather by eating berries.

Q What is this charming thing growing on the top of my gatepost?

Madeleine Martin MOORES HILL, INDIANA

Melinda: This common lichen (*Cladonia cristatella*) is found in Canada and most of the northeastern U.S. Often called red caps or British soldiers because their tops resemble the red caps once worn by British troops, these lichens are slow-growing and are usually found on rotting wood and occasionally on the bases of healthy trees. Lichens are formed by a rare partnership between an alga or cyanobacteria and a fungus. The fungus provides the protection, while the alga or cyanobacteria bring nutrients to the party.

Q I have mealybugs on my 20-year-old ponytail palms. Is there any way to save the plants?

Deborah McCullough
MYRTLE BEACH, SOUTH CAROLINA

Melinda: Mealybugs are a soft scale and, like all scales, can be challenging to control. Their waxy white covering protects them from most pesticides. Touch each insect with a cotton swab dipped in alcohol to dissolve this protective coat and kill the insect beneath. Insecticidal soap will kill immature, translucent mealybugs before they form their cottony covering. Organic lightweight horticulture oils like Summit Year-Round Spray Oil will kill all stages of this pest with several applications. Another option includes using a systemic insecticide that is applied to the soil and absorbed by the plant. I choose not to use this for the safety of my curious grandkids and plant-eating cats.

RIGHT: FOTOREQUEST/SHUTTERSTOCK

Q Barred owls have raised young in our nest box for years but a gray squirrel moved in recently. Will the owls still use the box?

Sheldon Schall WAUNAKEE, WISCONSIN

Kenn and Kimberly: In a battle between a squirrel and a barred owl for a nest box, the owl will almost certainly be the victor. Squirrels may be able to displace a smaller owl, like a screech-owl, but not one as large as the barred. In fact, although barred owls typically hunt smaller mammals, squirrels are also part of their diet. So when the owl returns, the squirrel is likely to beat a hasty retreat.

Mountain bluebird at nest cavity

Q I need to cut down a few trees. Would leaving part of the trunks standing about one story high be helpful for birds?

Terri Waddell AIKEN, SOUTH CAROLINA

Kenn and Kimberly: Absolutely! To the casual observer, a dead tree might seem to have little value. But dead trees support myriad life forms, from beautiful butterflies like the mourning cloak that overwinter as adults under the bark, to woodpeckers and the many kinds of other cavity-nesting birds that rely on dead trees for survival. When it becomes necessary to take out trees, if it's possible to leave part of the trunk standing without posing a risk to people or property, it's a compromise that can help wildlife.

Q How do I reduce stress on my plants when moving them inside?

Susan Zarecky HAYES, VIRGINIA

Melinda: Gradually introduce plants to their new home to reduce stress. Start by moving them to the sunniest window in your home. If possible, quarantine them from other plants and watch them for a few weeks to make sure they aren't carrying insects. Little by little, move the plants to spots with lower light until they reach their winter location. Consider supplementing natural light with artificial light, which is especially helpful in homes with fewer large windows. Adjust your watering schedule to accommodate for less light and higher humidity. Increase humidity by placing plants closer together or on trays with pebbles and water. Wait until spring to fertilize.

Q This hummingbird stayed in my yard last winter. Is it a young male or an adult female rufous hummingbird?

Marci Jones MELROSE, FLORIDA

Kenn and Kimberly: Adult female and young male hummingbirds look very similar in some species, so it can be hard to tell the difference. Among rufous hummingbirds, adult females often have some red on the throat, but it tends to be concentrated in the center of the lower throat. Young males can show the same pattern, but they typically have larger red spots scattered around the throat. Your photo shows an individual with big red patches over the side of the throat as well as in the center, so we would call it a young male.

KEEP IT UP *Some people worry that leaving a hummingbird feeder up in fall will prevent hummers from migrating. This is false. Hummingbirds know to migrate when days are shorter, and feeders can be an important food source as the birds head south.*

MOUNTAIN BLUEBIRD: TOM REICHNER/SHUTTERSTOCK

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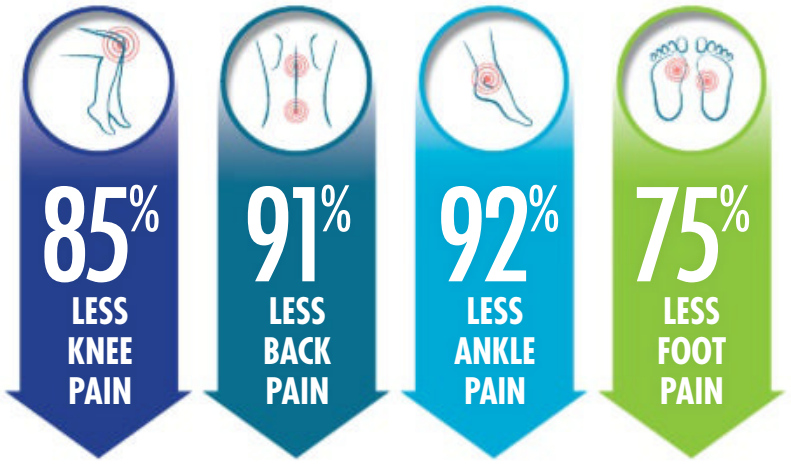

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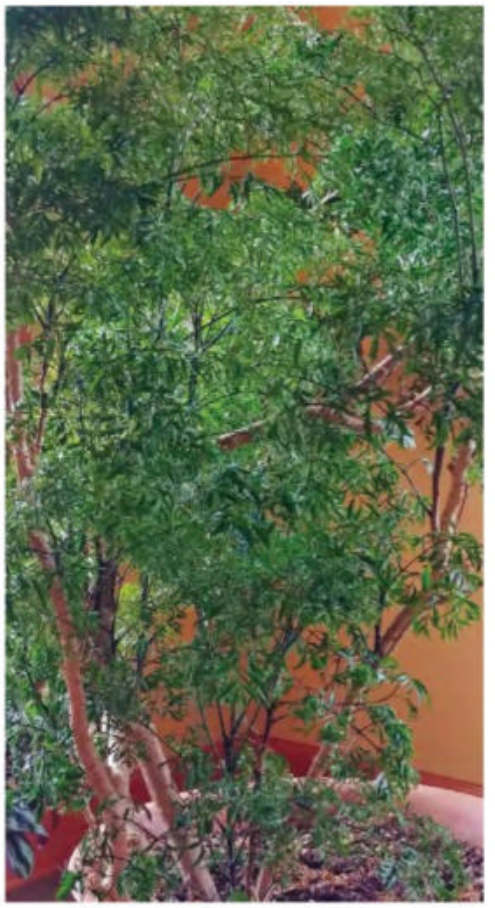
ASK THE EXPERTS



Q In 1982, my mom and I purchased this houseplant. Can you identify it?

Kevin Wicks STOUTSVILLE, MISSOURI

Melinda: Your mother's prize Ming aralia is doing so well! This was a popular plant during the houseplant explosion of the '70s. It is nice to see such a wonderful specimen. As you have discovered, this plant grows best in bright light; prefers moist, not soggy, soil and warm temperatures year-round; and requires little care. If needed, fertilize only a couple of times between spring and fall with a dilute solution of houseplant fertilizer. Prune the plants in late winter to control the size and to encourage denser growth.

Q How do you discourage whiteflies from visiting houseplants?

Juli Seyfried CINCINNATI, OHIO

Melinda: Whiteflies move indoors on newly purchased plants or on houseplants that spent the summer outdoors. These pests thrive in warm, less humid winter conditions inside. Their feeding can weaken an already stressed plant but usually won't kill it. Yellow sticky traps help manage, but won't eliminate, whiteflies. Be sure to use sticky traps inside only, as they can catch small wildlife. Repeat applications of insecticides labeled for whitefly control can further manage this pest. Always read the label carefully before using a product on a plant.

Q What's eating my avocado plant?

Susan Clark RIVERSIDE, CALIFORNIA

Melinda: Holes in the leaves of a plant often mean that an insect nibbled on it. But a closer look at these leaves shows brown spots as well as holes with brown edges. This indicates a leaf spot disease, not an insect problem. When portions of a leaf are damaged, the tissue dies and often falls off, producing holes in the foliage. Adjusting the growing conditions and ongoing care are often enough to manage these types of diseases. Make sure the plant receives plenty of light and is watered thoroughly and often enough to keep the soil evenly moist but not wet. Overwatering or allowing the plant to sit in water can lead to disease problems. Grow your plant in a draft-free, cool location to encourage healthier growth.

18+

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Q Is it normal for a great blue heron not to migrate? There's one still fishing in our backyard pond. **Marion Lambert** LYNDONVILLE, NEW YORK

Kenn and Kimberly: It's true that most great blue herons migrate to warmer climates in winter, but a few will remain far to the north, especially where some open water gives them access to fish, frogs and other aquatic prey. If the water is temporarily frozen, they may survive by catching mice or other small animals. Staying north is a gamble that doesn't always end well for these lingering birds but, on the other hand, they avoid the perils of migration by remaining where they are. Sometimes the risk pays off.

Q The leaves on our Japanese maple usually turn red before dropping. But last year the leaves turned beige and stayed on the tree all winter. What happened?

Sherry Lesiak POWELL, OHIO

Melinda: Blame it on the weather. A sudden drop in temperature can prevent the normal process of leaves turning color in autumn and then falling from the tree. Gradual cooling allows the trees to form a barrier, called the abscission layer, between the leaves and twigs, which helps the leaves detach. When we have a warmer than normal fall followed by a sudden or extreme drop in temperature, plants can't always completely form the abscission layer. The leaves eventually turn brown and remain on the tree.

MEET THE EXPERTS

Kimberly and Kenn Kaufman are the duo behind the Kaufman Field Guide series. They speak and lead bird trips all over the world.

Melinda Myers, a nationally known award-winning garden expert and TV/radio host, has written more than 20 books.

FROM LEFT: ANNETTE SHAFF; MADLEN/BOTH SHUTTERSTOCK

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Bonding Through Birds

Kindness spreads through this Kentucky nursing facility, but it starts with feathered friends at a window.

BY THE EDITORS AT *READER'S DIGEST*

Joe Hall is mostly paralyzed from the shoulders down, but that doesn't keep him from his favorite hobby—photographing birds. A special camera setup lets him capture a photo with just a twitch of his finger. This photo of Joe was taken by his friend Tommy Warren.

For Tammy Ray of Elizabethtown, Kentucky, the healing moments come when she's washing Joe Hall's window. "I get more out of scraping bird poop than a lot of the other things I do," Tammy says, laughing.

Tammy, a nurse practitioner, is one of those people for whom the coronavirus has meant more work, not less. Based at Fort Knox, she cares for soldiers, veterans and their families. With her clinic off-limits to all but the most urgent cases, COVID-19 regulations have her working virtually almost all the time, using Zoom and phone calls to try to help stressed-out patients she can't even touch.

Tammy and Joe, natives of this city of 30,000, are distant cousins who've been friends since they were kids. Joe is a born artist who started drawing "before I was 2," he says. A car crash when he was 19 left him mostly paralyzed below the shoulders. Now 53, Joe shares a room with two men at the Signature Health Care Nursing Facility, where photographing birds has become his passion and his release.

"I love shooting pictures so much," Joe says. "If it wasn't for the birds, I'd be kinda bored."

That is an understatement. In normal times, Joe can get out with friends to take day trips and snap photos, but COVID-19 restrictions mean no visits or excursions.

Still, birds will come to his window—and Tammy does, too. When it's dirty, he can't create. When he can't create, he can't be Joe. So two or three times a week, Tammy packs her cleaning rags and fresh birdseed and sets off on a journey that literally means the world to Joe. "She's my guardian angel," he says. "I've told her many times that I owe her a mint."

A mourning dove photo taken by Joe Hall through his window.

A blue jay lands at a feeder outside of Joe's room.

Despite the accident, Joe never stopped making art: writing poetry, drawing pictures, taking photos. Friends and family cobbled together a remarkable tripod-and-wood-plank contraption that allows him to aim and shoot with his mouth and the one finger he can twitch. He calls it a real "Kentucky redneck" masterpiece.

"I kinda hold it with a mouth stick, and there's this little red handle I can hit. It's a challenge, but I've mastered it," Joe says.

The results are beautiful images of jays, finches, cowbirds, mourning doves and woodpeckers. Sometimes he takes as many as 950 shots in a day to get what he wants. But few things buck his spirits like hearing that someone enjoys his work.

"When people say, 'Boy, that's good,' that means way more than money to me," Joe says.

Tammy knows how important Joe's art is to him. "Many people never see past his wheelchair," she says, but see his pictures and you'll start to see the real Joe Hall.

"Making and sharing art breaks down those walls," Joe says. His best friend at Signature is an "old hippie" named Tommy who never took a photograph in his life. When Joe got a new camera, he gave his old one to Tommy, who caught the bug. Now the pair shoot together whenever they can, and Joe has a plan to improve their gear. "I got one of those stimulus checks," he says, and he was aiming to get a new camera that Tommy can share.

Seeing her old friend paying it forward warms Tammy's heart. "Kindness and caring aren't unusual in Elizabethtown," she says; the coronavirus pandemic has triggered a surge of volunteerism, with churches and nonprofits stepping up to help. Bourbon distilleries switched to making hand sanitizer. Soup kitchens switched to curbside service. And the nurse practitioner from Fort Knox started filling bird feeders.

"It heals us both," Tammy says.

The NICEST PLACES in AMERICA
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Joe's story was submitted to the 2020 *Reader's Digest* Nicest Places in America search. To read more stories like this one, and to see which community was named Nicest Place in your state, visit *rd.com/nicest*.

Seasonal Snacking

Watch birds change their eating habits as colder weather rolls in. **BY KELSEY ROSETH**

Downy woodpecker

Black-capped chickadee

In winter, we start to bake spiced cookies, prepare pumpkin pies and eat warm, hearty casseroles made with winter vegetables. Whether we do it consciously or not, we shift what we eat to adapt to the change in seasons. When it comes to what birds munch in winter, the same principles apply, although their quest for survival is far more perilous than ours.

"It comes down to two things: food availability and calorically dense nutrition," says John Rowden, senior director of bird-friendly communities at the National Audubon Society. "Without the abundance of spring and summer, birds have to work harder to find food and sample more of their environment."

While birds have quite a few high-activity phases in their lives, including migration, breeding and raising young, limited food supplies make winter more energetically expensive.

As temps drop, the foraging behaviors of birds change. Insects start to disappear and natural seed sources dwindle, forcing birds to use extra energy searching for food, with a lower rate of return. This means certain parts of their diet ramp up, such as snacking on

FROM LEFT: JOHN GILL; FRANCIS & JANICE BERGQUIST; MARIE READ

A tufted titmouse plucks a seed from a sunflower head.

high-calorie seeds and remaining fruits. And for most birds, other habits stop, such as hunting bugs. Those that still do eat insects are required to look deeper into cracks and crevices for their prey, which takes a lot of work.

Winter feeding tends to vary depending on whether the bird migrates. Migratory birds put on a layer of fat, just enough to make it through the flight. Then they shift to finding food at their destination. However, birds that stick around not only store up fat; some cache food for later. "It takes more calories to maintain that high internal body temperature when the ambient temperature is so much lower," says John.

Birds also join flocks to locate lunch. With more birds to find food or watch for predators, the group can be more vigilant in staying safe and possibly collect more food. Flocks also provide further protection, as it's confusing for the predator when a lot of birds are moving around quickly within close proximity.

Keep your eyes open as you gaze out your windows and you, too, may see birds engaging in different, exciting winter feeding behaviors.

Kelsey Roseth is a Minnesota-based birder and writer. She keeps her feeders full of sunflower seeds, mealworms and homemade suet all winter long.

FROSTY FEEDING

Two ways to cater to the habits of winter birds.

CRAM EXTRA CALORIES

Stuff your feeders full of high-calorie, fatty foods, such as peanuts, mealworms, sunflower seeds and suet (all of which stay fresh longer with lower temps).

GET MESSY

Cut back on fall cleanup to provide natural insect and seed sources for birds. Reduce deadheading and keep leaf litter and brush around.

The sun rising over Joshua Tree National Park

Between Two Deserts

Three ways to explore nature at Joshua Tree National Park.

BY RACHEL MAIDL

1 Watch for winter birds at **Cottonwood Spring.** It's one of the few water sources in the park, which sits on the edges of the Mojave and Colorado deserts. Spot southwestern birds like the phainopepla or greater roadrunner, or hike any of the trails that start in the area.

2 Visit one of the many geological highlights of this park filled with rugged terrain and ancient rock formations. The most impressive may be **Skull Rock,** a morbid-looking formation just off Park Boulevard. For more, drive the 18-mile-long **Geology Tour Road.**

3 True adventure seekers can **scale the rocks** in the park. Beginners can hire a climbing guide or take a day class, while more experienced climbers may pick from more than 8,000 routes. **Hidden Valley Campground** is popular for its proximity to climbing sites.

Joshua tree

THE NAMESAKE

Learn about the park's signature trees.

Mojave Desert natives, Joshua trees thrive in temps from 120 to -13 degrees and can grow up to 30 feet tall and wide (or larger). They are found from Southern California into Utah and are present in most areas of the park.

The trees are important for local wildlife—birds such as cactus wrens, American kestrels and northern flickers use the spiky branches as a protected perch, and the yucca moth pollinates the creamy white flowers.

FROM TOP: GARYKAVANAGH; RON AND PATTY THOMAS/BOTH GETTY IMAGES

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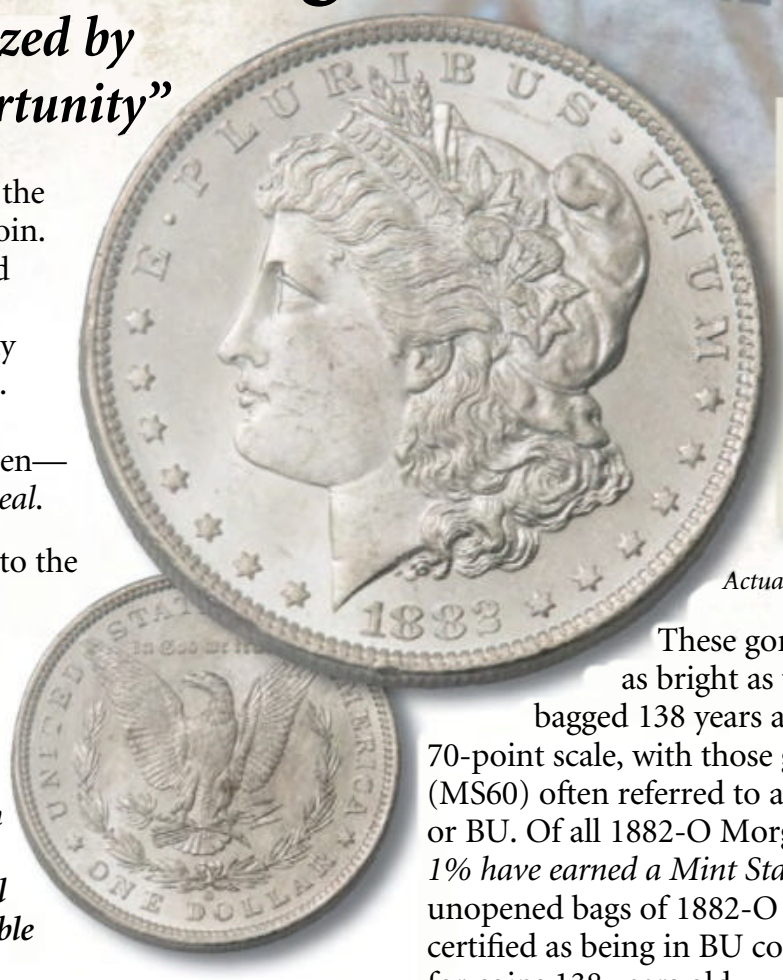

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The U.S. Treasury Hoard

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The Great Southern Treasury Hoard

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What are your best houseplant growing tips?

Readers share tried-and-true tricks for success with gardening indoors.

When my inside potted plants are dry, I put **ice cubes** on top of the soil to slowly melt and water the plant without flooding the pot. It's easy, there's no mess, and I'm less likely to overwater this way.

Lisa Sherman CARLSBAD, CALIFORNIA

Collect rainwater and use it on your houseplants. I've been doing it for years!

Sharon Woodworth GEORGETOWN, KENTUCKY

Always check with a *moisture meter* before watering. **Louise McVay** WALESKA, GEORGIA

Move houseplants outside in summer. They love rain, heat and humidity. Bring them in before first frost and spray any insects with an organic insecticide to prevent the bugs from moving into your home. **Lynn Jones** SALEM, INDIANA

I water houseplants with *water I've boiled eggs in.* It works better for me than any commercial plant food!

Sandy Lewis
AKRON, OHIO

I read that sprinkling the dirt with **cinnamon** prevents powdery mildew, so I gave it a shot—it worked! I no longer have a problem with the disease.

Jeanine Buettner
KALISPELL, MONTANA

YOUR TURN!

Q: What are your best tips for container planting?

Share your answer with us at *birdsandblooms.com/submit.*

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Caption This!

What's going through this blue jay's mind while it takes an icy drink?

Paul Fader of Kingsville, Maryland, noticed this blue jay attempting to get some water after an 8-inch snowfall in his area.

SHARE YOUR CAPTION

Your funny caption for this blue jay could appear in the next issue. Share your clever idea with us at *birdsandblooms.com/caption*.

LAST ISSUE'S WINNING CAPTION

"Why are you so crabby? It's a free ride!"

SUBMITTED BY
SAMUEL NASH
LEXINGTON, GEORGIA

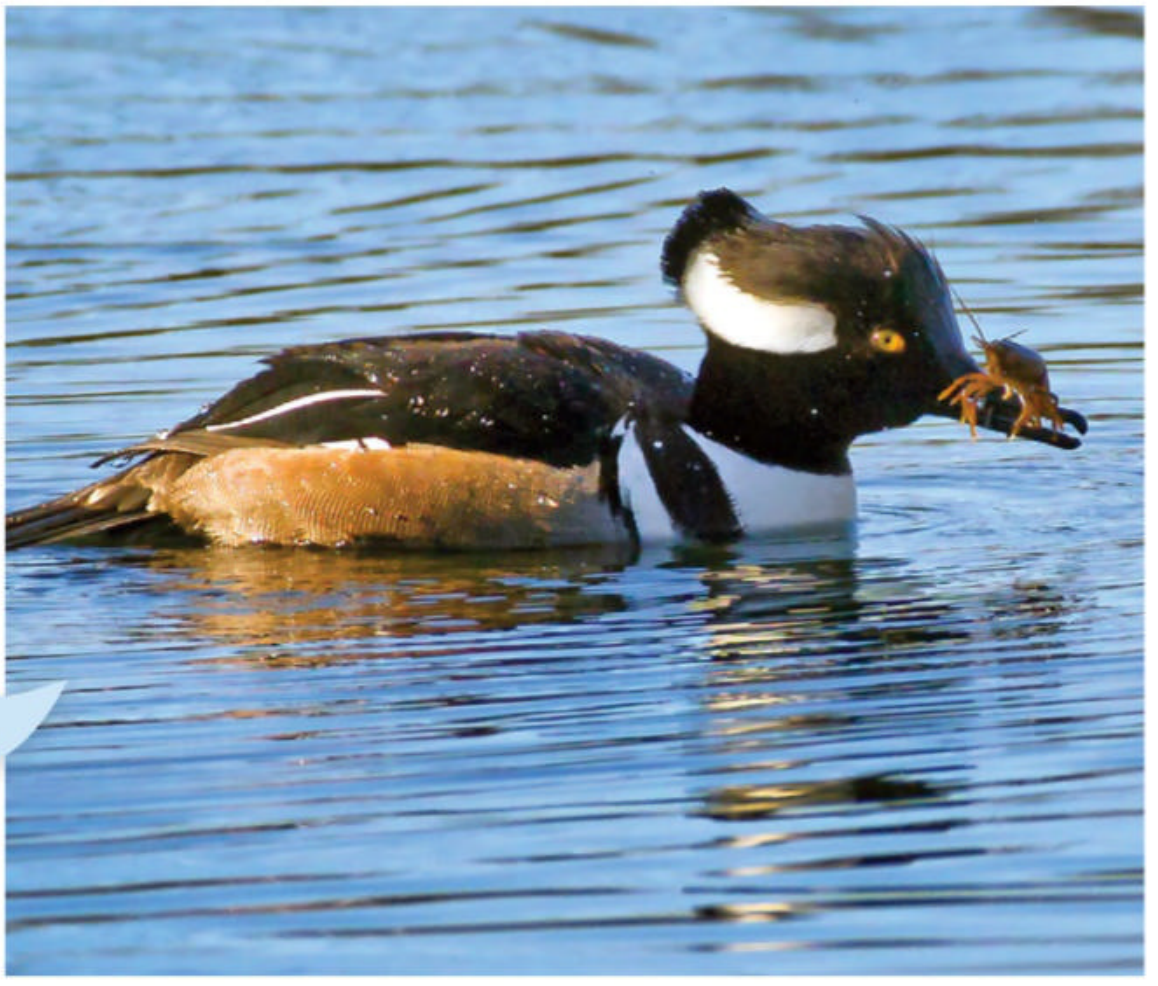

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PHOTO QUIZ

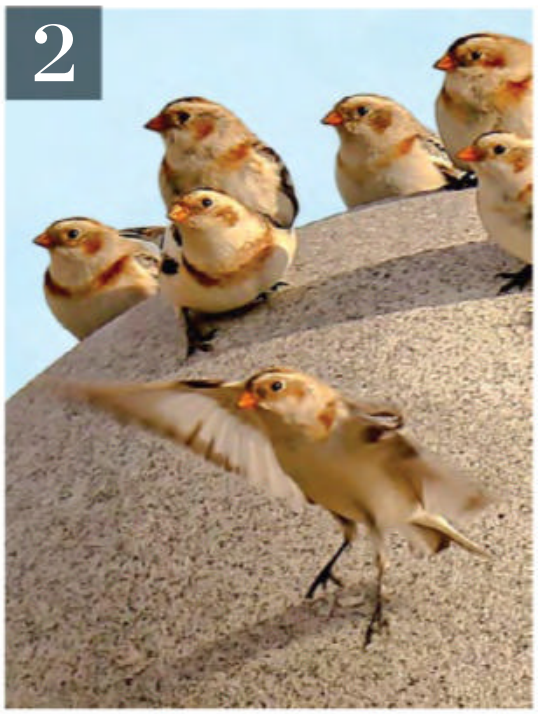
Frosty Feathers

Can you identify all these birds with snow in their names?

answers on the bottom!

1

2



True or False?

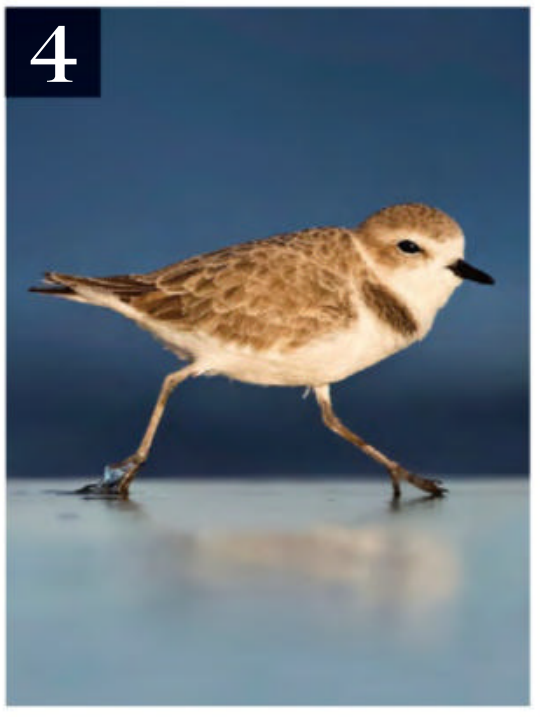
A. **SNOW GEESE** really do prefer the cold—some breed in Siberia or Greenland.

B. **MOSTLY WHITE** birds have black tips on their wings to help them ward off predators.

C. **WHITE-WINGED SNOWFINCHES** live in the high, snowy mountains of Europe and Asia.

3

4



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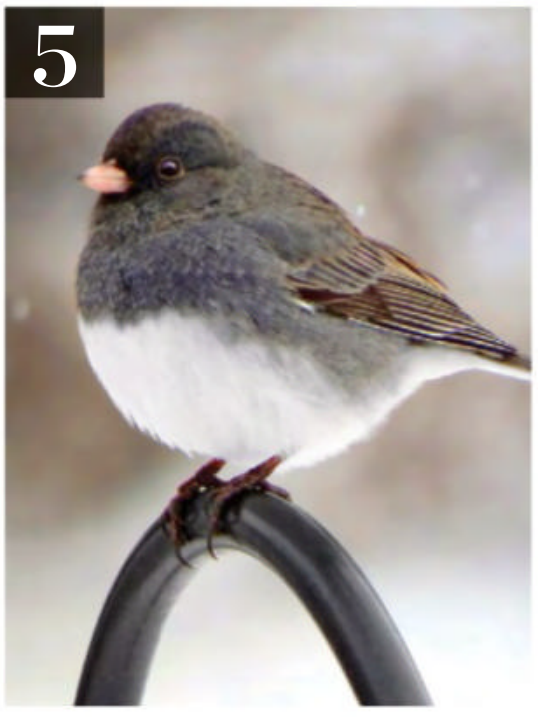

1: VICTORIA GOSNEY; 2: KATE FOLAN; 3: JEANELL WHITELEY; 4: SUSAN ELLISON; 5: CINDY NELSON

ANSWERS 1. SNOWY OWL 2. SNOW BUNTINGS 3. SNOWY EGRET 4. SNOWY PLOVER 5. DARK-EYED JUNCO, NICKNAMED SNOWBIRD A. TRUE B. FALSE; THE EXTRA MELANIN HELPS MAKE THE SURFACE OF THE FEATHERS STRONGER C. TRUE

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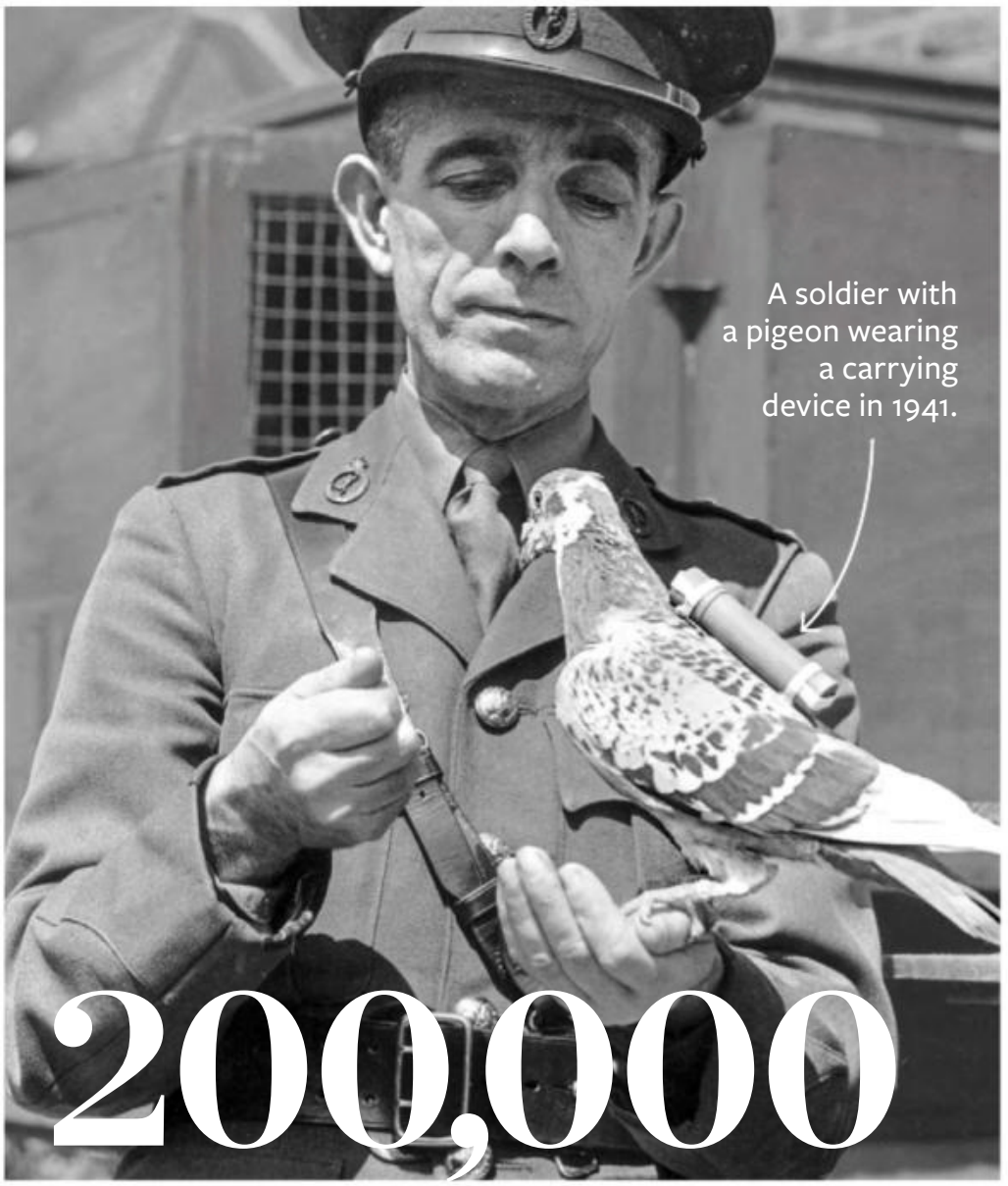
Birds in Pop Culture

Things you might not know about these avian celebrities.

BY EMILY HANNEMANN



A soldier with a pigeon wearing a carrying device in 1941.

200,000

During World War II, British armed forces used more than 200,000 homing pigeons to deliver crucial messages. Some of the birds were awarded medals for their bravery.

364

Engineering students at Purdue University built a licking machine and found that it takes 364 licks to reach the center of a Tootsie Pop, not three as Mr. Owl famously claimed.

A raven at the Tower of London

4

In the *Harry Potter* books, the starring wizard's owl, Hedwig, is female. But male snowy owls were used for the movie since they have a whiter appearance and weigh only 4 pounds—slightly less than female owls.

5

Five NFL teams are named after real and made-up birds: Eagles, Ravens, Cardinals, Falcons and Seahawks.

57

After 57 years, Kellogg's decided to give Toucan Sam a controversial makeover. The Froot Loops mascot is now more cartoonish and neon-colored.

7

King Charles II believed England would fall if there were no ravens at the Tower of London. Today, seven are kept on the grounds.

FROM TOP: STEVENS; HOBERMAN COLLECTION/BOTH GETTY IMAGES

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